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GINETTE BILLARD

Jacques Demy and His Other World

Like de Broca, Demy is a talent who seems too light for many people to take seriously; his films are too pleasant, too full of grace. Yet, in a sense, the press agentry of the Nouvelle Vague should have led us to anticipate films more like Demy's than the actual knottier works of Truffaut, Godard, or Chabrol. It is Demy who sacrifices banal plots and morals to the sheer delights of *mise en scène,* without any compensating intellectualization. His films

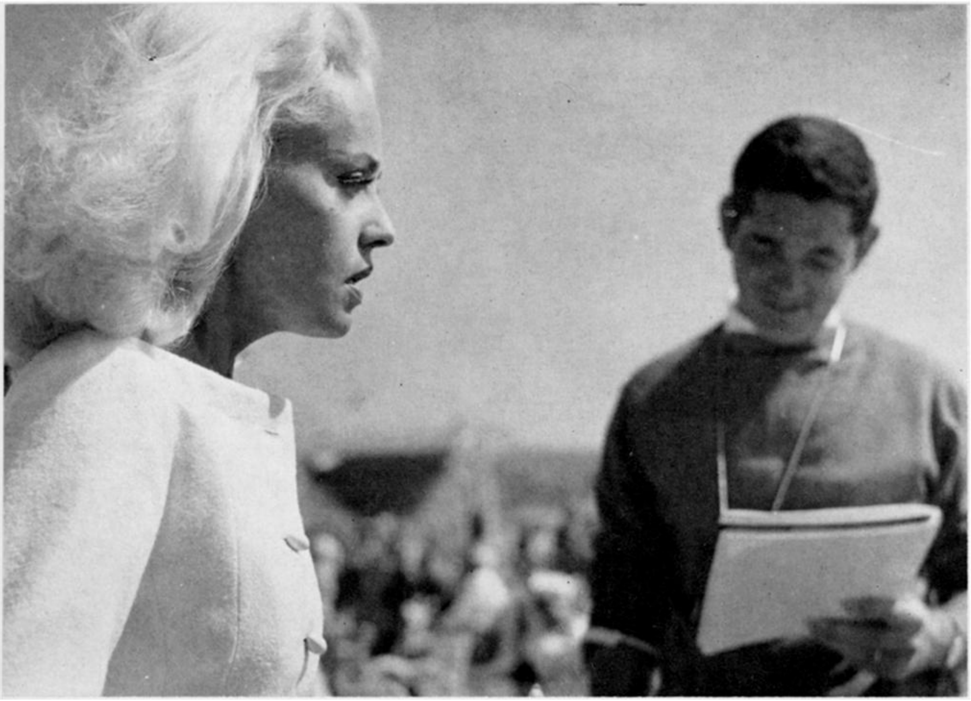
Above: LES PARAPLUIES DE CHERBOURG.

are the work of a pure *metteur en scène*—a man who projects onto the screen his private world, who loves to fling the camera about, who is no more "committed" than a ballet choreographer. Like the best Hollywood musicals, Demy's films can make you enjoy the pure fluidity and dash of the medium yet avoid the problem of novelty of story material, because the "musical" line and rhythm of the film provides, like the music in an opera, another kind of perspective.

"Le jour n'est plus pur que le fond de mon coeur." ("The day is not more pure than the depth of my heart.") This quotation, from the dialogue of *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg*, Demy's latest film, is suggestive not only of this film, but of Demy's work since the beginning. Demy was born in Nantes in 1931; he is married to Agnès Varda, the only woman director in France. One might take him for a typical member of the Nouvelle Vague, but in fact he started in the film business in the most classical way: as an assistant director, then director of several short films: the routinely romantic *Le Sabotier du Val de Loire* (under the guidance

Jeanne Moreau in BAIE DES ANGES

Left: Anouk Aimée in LOLA



Jacques Demy directs Jeanne Moreau in Baie des Anges

of Georges Rouquier, one of the mainstays of the documentary school in France), *Le Bel Indifférent* (on the story by Cocteau), *Le Saint Curé d'Ars,* and so on.

Since then, besides one of the sketches for *Seven Deadly Sins* (Lust), he has made three features: *Lola* with Anouk Aimée, *La Baie des Anges* with Jeanne Moreau, and *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg* with Catherine Deneuve. *Lola* is the story of a dancer in a sailor's nightclub in the harbor of Nantes; after seven years she is still waiting for the man who left her with a child and disappeared. *La Baie des Anges* traces the downfall of a young man who meets a not-so-young woman, attractive and dangerous; she precipitates him into the hell of gambling. *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg* is the tale of a trusting girl who gives herself to her fiancé on the eve of his departure for the army and never hears from him again. So in order to give a father to the baby which she—naturally—is expecting, she marries the rich young man who has been waiting all the time, patient and willing.

Told thus, these three stories seem to deserve all the epithets that have been thrown in Demy's face: "horrible melodramas," "shopgirl fantasies," and the like. But what if our intellectual critics are not able to recognize a beautiful story when they are told one, poetry when they encounter it, and charm when they see it on the screen?

The thing that strikes one most in Demy's films is that they *are* fantasies, the fantasies of someone who does not belong to this world: the famous "circles" in *Lola* (the same story happening to different people at different times or simultaneously) make it look as if Demy spent his life wondering: now how would I react if this and that were happening to me if I was a little girl, or her mother, or a girl of 17, or a B-girl, or the woman who lives for her only love? Demy cannot help but explore all the possibilities and *Lola* is a film which gives us the reactions of all these characters, sometimes concentrated in one person, to whom the same things happen.

Demy also does not live in a given period of time: the things which happened to Lola when she was very young, and her name was Cécile, are also happening to the little girl whose name is Cécile. Nor does he live in his own country: all his films smell of the Hollywood paraphernalia: the man in white whom Lola awaits, the American sailors, the B-girls in *Lola,* the gambling resorts in *La Baie des Anges,* the musical angle, the great importance given to decoration—Donen and Minnelli have been here before, and so have the westerns that the French rank so high. (It has even been said of Demy that his main defect was that he was not born somewhere within range of Hollywood.) He sometimes gives the impression that he does not belong to his own sex: all his films are centered around women: he tells their stories with almost feminine refinement and charm. Yet the actresses in Demy's films have to go through severe ordeals. Anouk Aimée in *Lola* manages to survive her impossible part through her physique and her talent. Jeanne Moreau in *La Baie des Anges* is older, uglier, skinnier than she has ever been (yes, even in *Eve*). As for Catherine Deneuve, this very young, very blond former fiancée of Vadim has never before shouldered the weight of a whole film and she passes through this trial with all the temerity of extreme youth.

Demy does not even belong to his city: he has lived in Paris for years, but all his films are provincial: they take place in provincial towns, ports preferably (Nantes for *Lola,* Cherbourg for *Les Parapluies,* Nice for *La Baie des Anges*). He sometimes seems to be outside of his own craft, for instance in the extreme importance of music in his films (*Les Parapluies de Cherbourg* is in fact sung throughout, rather than spoken: it is a "film en-chanté" —enchanted but also in song). He also gives unusual importance to set-design: Bernard Evein, one of the best French art directors, has been faithful to Demy in most of his films, and they have a certain visual continuity—such as the red wall paper in *Le Bel Indifférent* echoed many years later by the red wall paper in *Les Parapluies.*

And still, in spite of such elaborations, which all too easily lead to commercial slickness, Demy's films genuinely "exist": they have in common a charm and a poetry which cannot be mistaken. There is a kind of art which is nostalgic without being sentimental, fantasist without being silly; and this is the realm in which Demy's imagination operates. After all, *Lola* is a love story of a woman who would not give up her romantic dream, but who in the end happened to be right. *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg* is not the conventional story of a great love betrayed, with a villain, lies, despair, etc. It is a modern story of two people who were in love with each other at one time in their life, and then found happiness each with another partner, and life just goes on.

Demy once said that he wished all his films could have the same characters. With the exception of *La Baie des Anges,* this is almost true: Marc/Michel, the common hero of his other two films, mentions in *Les Parapluies* a girl he once loved in another port—and who of course is Lola. There is also a parallel to be drawn between the mother-daughter relationship in *Les Parapluies* (Anne Vernon and Catherine Deneuve) and in *Lola* (Elina Labourdette and the little girl). It would be unfair to burden Demy with a reference to *La Comédie Humaine;* but in his future films we may see a similar patient unfolding of a richly personal vision.

LES PARAPLUIES DE CHERBOURG.